

The Open Access Interviews: Ian Gibson, former Chairman of the UK House of Commons Science & Technology Committee

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Like all successful movements, Open Access ([OA](#)) has experienced a number of milestone events. Amongst the more significant of these were the creation of the physics preprint repository [arXiv](#) in 1991, the 1994 [Subversive Proposal](#), the 2002 Budapest Open Access Initiative ([BOAI](#)), and the introduction in 2005 of the first [Open Access Policy](#) of the US National Institutes of Health ([NIH](#)).

However, one of the more interesting but less celebrated events in the history of OA is surely the 2004 [Inquiry](#) into scientific publication conducted by the [UK House of Commons Science & Technology Committee](#). The inquiry seems particularly noteworthy in the wake of this year's [controversial Finch Report](#), and the new [OA policy](#) that Research Councils UK ([RCUK](#)) announced in response.

The 2004 Inquiry was remarkable for a number of reasons, not least the way in which it managed to explore a deeply divisive issue in an independent and fair-minded way, despite intense lobbying from all sides.

This independence was all the more striking given that the Inquiry was itself a response to lobbying by OA publishers, origins that gave rise to a great deal of paranoid speculation.

On discovering that the Inquiry was a product of behind-the-scenes agitation by OA publishers, for instance, subscription publishers became extremely jumpy, fearful that it could lead to government intervention that would impact negatively on their profits. In their turn, OA advocates became increasingly concerned that the Select Committee [did not understand](#) the issues, and that the Inquiry was therefore in the process of being "[captured](#)" by subscription publishers.

The widening suspicion led to a great many rumours and conspiracy theories. When publishing consultant [David Worlock](#) was appointed as "specialist adviser" to the Committee, for instance, OA advocates assumed that his appointment had been masterminded by subscription publishers, with the aim of ensuring that the Committee ended up concluding that the status quo should not be disrupted.

What those outside the Committee and its support staff did not know, however, was that Worlock's appointment was in part a tactical move intended to act as a counterweight to the fact that the Inquiry had been triggered by lobbying from OA publishers. Likewise, they did not know that another (more OA friendly) specialist had been interviewed for the position, but that the Committee had been more impressed by Worlock.

Those caught up in the rumour mill also failed to appreciate that the role of a specialist adviser is not to provide opinions, draw conclusions, or write reports, but solely to offer insights and contacts based on their expertise.

In this case, it was felt necessary to appoint an adviser because the Committee members had no personal experience of the publishing industry. As such, they needed someone with the necessary knowledge to answer the practical questions that they had about it.

When recruiting advisers, select committee staff consult with in-house specialists, and then call up people in the field to ask for suggestions.

Surprised

In the event, when the Committee finally published its [Report](#) (on 20th July 2004), its conclusions surprised everyone. Subscription publishers, who had lobbied hard for the maintenance of the

status quo, were surprised. OA publishers, who had hoped the Committee would call for wide scale adoption of OA publishing (aka “[gold OA](#)”), were surprised. Librarians, who were keen to see the cause of institutional repositories advanced but had no great expectations, were surprised. And researchers who had called on the Committee to support self-archiving (aka “[green OA](#)”) were likewise surprised.

The surprise was that the Committee had recommended “all UK higher education institutions [should] establish institutional repositories on which their published output can be stored and from which it can be read, free of charge, online”.

This was precisely what supporters of green OA (primarily researchers) had wanted the Committee to recommend, and precisely what subscription publishers most feared. For OA publishers, the surprise was that the Report recommended only that the research community “experiment” with OA publishing.

In short, the Committee had concluded that OA should be embraced, but that green OA should be prioritised over gold – notwithstanding the fact that the Inquiry had been undertaken in response to lobbying by OA publishers.

The news was most grim for subscription publishers, since the Report also recommended that “Research Councils and other Government funders [should] mandate their funded researchers to deposit a copy of all of their articles in [institutional repositories].”

Contrary to the fervid rumours circulating amongst green OA advocates, therefore, the Committee appeared not only to have understood the issues, but had proved impervious to the barrage of lobbying that it had been subjected to throughout the Inquiry. Strikingly, those who had been responsible for most of this lobbying were the ones most disappointed with the outcome – that is, subscription publishers, learned societies, and OA publishers.

For subscription publishers, the recommendation that published output should be posted in institutional repositories was bad news, but the proposal that self-archiving mandates should be introduced in order to ensure that that happened was *very bad* news. And while OA publishers self-evidently supported the *principle* of Open Access, they were generally unsympathetic to green OA, which they viewed as being competitive to gold. They too, therefore, were disappointed. Ironically, although most did not realise it, the real winners were researchers.

There was, however, a sting in the tail. When the UK government responded to the Report it rejected most of the Committee’s recommendations, arguing that it was not appropriate for the government to “intervene to support one model or another”.

But the history of OA is as full of surprise turnarounds as it is of dashed hopes, and there was a further twist to the story: Research Councils UK ([RCUK](#)) subsequently decided to follow the Committee’s advice, and in 2005 introduced a self-archiving mandate. Meanwhile, UK universities were busy setting up institutional repositories so that researchers had somewhere to post their papers.

All in all, it seems fair to say that the 2004 Inquiry set an important precedent for the OA movement, and provided a compelling model for other countries and research institutions to follow, not least [Harvard University](#) – which adopted its first mandate in February 2008.¹

The Inquiry also provided a vivid demonstration of just how divisive the topic of OA is, and the considerable lengths that publishers (both subscription and OA publishers), as well as learned societies, are prepared to go in order to protect their businesses.

¹ Harvard would of course have been influenced by the 2005 NIH Policy as well; but then the UK Inquiry would surely have influenced the NIH, which announced its OA Policy on February 3rd 2005.

Really nothing

Given the very different conclusions that the Finch Committee had reached earlier this year, I became keen to find out more about the origins and the process of the 2004 Inquiry. So I contacted [Dr Ian Gibson](#), the then Chairman of the Science & Technology Select Committee, and Labour MP for [Norwich North](#). To my delight, he agreed to do an interview with me.

Gibson's account of the Inquiry is fascinating, and anyone interested in the history of OA will surely benefit from reading what he has to say in the two-part interview I publish below.

After speaking to Gibson, I found myself continuing to muse over why the Committee had made the recommendations it had – particularly in light of the repeated assertions of both subscription publishers and learned societies that in reality there was no access problem, and that the traditional subscription model remained the very best way of disseminating research. More significantly, they warned ominously that forcing OA on the world would destroy the peer review system, and damage the UK economy.

Why did members of the Select Committee call publishers' bluff? Speaking to me, Gibson said "When we asked them how they saw the whole issue there was nothing in what they said that we agreed with. Really nothing."

However, I was left still wondering why Gibson and his colleagues seemed not to have taken the apocalyptic warnings very seriously, particularly in light of the fact that eight years later Finch had blinked. The most obvious difference between the two committees, of course, was that the Finch committee included publishers – including representatives from [Wiley Blackwell](#), [Springer](#) and [IoP Publishing](#). By contrast, select committees are composed of MPs alone.

Three further thoughts occurred to me.

First, as Gibson points out, the Committee included a number of former scientists, people who had published in peer-reviewed journals and who were – contrary to the fears of OA advocates – sufficiently familiar with the issues to take what they were told with a large pinch of salt. Importantly, they approached the issue from the perspective of researchers, not of publishers.

Prior to entering the House of Commons, for instance, Gibson had been employed as a researcher in biological sciences, at the University of East Anglia ([UEA](#)) in Norwich. More specifically, he specialised in the study of cancer – a field catered for by a plethora of scholarly journals, many of which have become prohibitively expensive.

Gibson vividly remembers how each year he was approached by UEA librarians and asked to provide a list of biomedical titles that could be cancelled so that the library could better eke out its increasingly inadequate serials budget. As a result, Gibson ended up having to pay for some of the journals his research group needed out of his own research budget.

Second, the sometimes belligerent, and often strident, reactions that the Inquiry elicited from subscription publishers and learned societies led the Committee to conclude that they were dealing with a classic case of "[The lady doth protest too much, methinks](#)."

As Gibson puts it, "The way I saw it was that the fact that these people came forward in the way they did demonstrated that they were very sensitive about what was going on. These publishers had never been challenged, and they believed that nobody had the right to challenge them."

As evidence of this attitude, Gibson reports that Elsevier, the largest publisher, had initially refusal to communicate with the Committee other than through a lobbyist, something previously unheard of in the world of select committees.

The Committee from Hell

Finally, we should note that Gibson is not the kind of person to unquestioningly toe the line. As an MP he was a committed Labour Party [backbencher](#) more interested in helping his constituents, and standing by his convictions, than climbing the greasy pole of politics.

If he disagreed with the then Labour government's policy on any topic he felt to be important, therefore, Gibson was inclined to vote against it – as he did over [student top-up fees](#), for instance; and as he did over the [extension to 42 days of the pre-charge detention limit for terrorism suspects](#). (Gibson's voting record can be viewed [here](#)).

This independence had earned Gibson a reputation for being a first-rate constituency MP, and it had won him many [admirers in his home town](#). He was also widely recognised as a man of conscience. In 2009, *The Guardian* [described](#) him as “one of the more impressive members of the House of Commons.”

Unsurprisingly, during Gibson's chairmanship, the *Times Higher* [described](#) the Science & Technology Committee as, “The Committee from Hell” – a description that Gibson still relishes. “[W]e all enjoyed getting stuck into issues where there was a debate to be had,” he says proudly.

Publishers would have been aware of Gibson's reputation, and no doubt for this reason they appear eventually to have put more effort into lobbying the UK government than the Committee itself. Evidence of this surfaced in 2005, when OA advocate [David Prosser](#) made a Freedom of Information request for details of the meetings that the UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science and Innovation [Lord Sainsbury](#) had at the time with the various stakeholders of scholarly publishing.²

While their lobbying did not ultimately prevent RCUK from introducing a mandate, as proposed by the Committee, publishers simply revised their strategy – and began to signal that they were prepared to accept the inevitability of gold OA, so long as it did not impact on their profits. However, they redoubled their lobbying efforts against green OA, which they had concluded would inevitably mean lower profits if it was widely adopted.

It was this new strategy that bore fruit in the Finch Report. Not only did Finch turn the 2004 Report on its head – by insisting that gold OA become the main vehicle for scholarly publishing, and green OA downgraded to a minor role – but it did so in a way that looks set to enable publishers to continue enjoying the same level of profits in an OA publishing environment as they have long enjoyed from subscription publishing. In short, Finch will allow publishers to embrace OA on their own terms and, importantly, to port their high profit levels to the new OA publishing environment.

Since this is highly unlikely to solve the affordability problem, as OA advocates have always assumed it would, the fundamental problem afflicting the research community is unlikely to be addressed. It will simply be transposed to the new publishing environment. This is good news for publishers, but bad news for the research community.

We should note in passing that dissent comes at a price. From the Labour government's point of view, Gibson came to be seen as a dangerous rebel – or as the BBC [put it](#) in 2009, “a maverick left winger.” It was for this reason, says Gibson, that in 2005 he was removed as chairman of the Science & Technology Committee.

And when in 2009 the [expenses scandal](#) engulfed British politicians, Gibson was hauled in front of the [Labour Party's National Executive Committee](#) to be told that he was henceforth barred from standing again as a Labour candidate – an event one Gibson supporter [characterised](#) as a “[kangaroo court](#)”. Gibson responded by immediately standing down as an MP, forcing a by-election that saw Tory candidate Chloe Smith take the seat from Labour. A rebel to the end!

² See [here](#).

Much to wonder at

As suggested earlier, there is much to wonder at in Gibson's account of the 2004 Inquiry. However, for me the most telling moment was when he told me that researchers had failed to provide a unified or organised response to the Inquiry.

As Gibson puts it, "When we held our Inquiry researchers didn't get together on the issue, and their organisation was poor ... As a consequence, there was no organisation of academics we could speak to that had taken up the issue."

Indeed, most researchers were blissfully unaware that the Inquiry was taking place. Those that did were generally uninterested in the topic, apparently assuming that it had little or no relevance to them.

This is not surprising: even today not many scientists seem interested in embracing new ways of publishing their research papers, with most preferring to stick to the system they have inherited, despite the many failings they see in it.

It is also apparent that researchers are generally happier when disagreeing with one other than when co-operating. For this reason, no doubt, even those who take an interest in OA have never made any serious attempt to create a central OA organisation, certainly not one driven by researchers – a fact that others and I have pointed out in the past.³

The problem with this morbid individualism, however, is that it has allowed publishers to consistently call the shots, and act in their own interests rather than the interests of the research community.

In 2004, researchers were fortunate to have a bunch of strong-minded individuals on the Select Committee who were able and willing to press their case for them. By contrast, the recent Finch Committee was not only top-heavy in publishers, but those appointed to represent the research community appear to have allowed themselves to be swayed by the publishers.

As a result, unlike in 2004, there was no independent authority to guide RCUK when it set about updating its OA policy. And since those drawing up the policy appeared not to understand the issues sufficiently well, they had little choice but to follow the recommendations of the Finch Committee.⁴

One is left with a powerful sense that most academics are unwilling to take responsibility for upgrading and improving formal scholarly communication, even though doing so could only benefit them. As Gibson puts it, "they really are their own worst enemy. They are worried about giving more money to the publishers, but they are drawn to the kudos of being published in a high-profile journal."

Meanwhile, they appear to be constitutionally incapable of acting in concert to pursue their own collective interests. One is reminded of the words of [Gerald of Wales](#), who said of the Welsh during their 12th Century struggles with the [Anglo-Normans](#), "[If they would be inseparable, they would be insuperable](#)".

But does not the [resistance](#) to the US Research Works Act ([RWA](#)) we witnessed earlier this year point to a new willingness to act in concert over these issues? By joining together researchers forced Elsevier to drop its support for a Bill that would have effectively outlawed green OA in the US.

Perhaps not. That incident aside, the omens are not currently great, and discord appears still to be [rife](#) (see also [here](#)). Moreover, in pursuit of greater access, most OA advocates appear blind to the larger *affordability* problem. What they fail to appreciate is that, unless they take a greater

³ See [here](#) and [here](#).

⁴ Indeed, it would seem that the Finch Committee itself was constrained, since it could be argued that [David Willetts set the terms of reference](#) for the Finch Report in such a way that the Committee was constrained in what it could recommend.

interest in the issue of cost, gold OA looks set to prove as much of a financial burden on the research community as subscription publishing has been. In fact, it may turn out to be more costly, and have some [highly undesirable consequences](#) as a result.

Those looking for a solution to the affordability problem, therefore, may be better to pin their hopes on the likelihood that other countries will spurn rather than copy the Finch/RCUK model. Here the omens [seem to be better](#). Who knows, action taken abroad could eventually persuade RCUK to make a U-turn. Indeed, there is already some evidence of [slippage](#) in its position.

PART ONE

(Conducted on 24th September 2012)



Ian Gibson

RP: *Let's start with the origins of the Inquiry you chaired in 2004 into scientific publishing. [Jan Velterop](#) – formerly of Open Access publisher BioMed Central ([BMC](#)) – has taken credit for persuading you to hold the Inquiry. On a mailing list in 2010 Velterop [said](#), “BioMed Central ... initiated the discussions with Members of Parliament in the UK that led to the UK Parliamentary Inquiry into OA.” Is that your recollection?*

IG: It's true that Jan Velterop – and I think his PA – took me to dinner once. I also got [Dave King](#) to come along to another dinner that BioMed Central organised. Dave King is an old mate of mine. We taught at university together.

RP: *David King was the Chief Scientific Adviser to the British government when Tony Blair was Prime Minister.*

IG: Yes. So it's true that Jan came to me, and I listened to him and I thought it would be a good idea to hold an inquiry. Having been an academic I have published a lot of papers myself, so I knew the system, and I knew the problems with it.

RP: *Can you say what these problems are?*

IG: I knew the problems of peer review, and the issues associated with getting published in journals. I also knew – and I think one or two other members of the committee probably knew it too – the problems that libraries have long faced.

RP: *I assume you are referring to the library affordability problem, otherwise known as the “[serials crisis](#)”?*

IG: Yes. I taught in a university for thirty-five years and every year of my academic life I was asked to judge which journals we could forego in the university library.

RP: *The nub of the problem is that the budgets of university libraries have been under growing pressure, while the cost of subscribing to scholarly journals has been rising more quickly than the consumer price index. This, coupled with a constant increase in the number of journals, has made it more and more difficult for university libraries to afford all the journals that their researchers need.*

IG: Correct. Our library, for instance, had a lot of journals that had been bought during the development of the university, when there was money around. Many of these journals weren't read very much, so there was a case for asking whether they were all needed, but I was in cancer research and the journals in that field had become very expensive. There were also a great many of them.

The problem was also exacerbated by the fact that libraries are always one of the first areas to be hammered when money is tight. They have been under the financial cosh for some time now.

So it came to the point where the library had to say to us, "We cannot justify buying them all."

RP: *What impact did this have on you as a researcher?*

IG: It meant that I had to start buying journals for the people in my research group out of my own research grant. I didn't resent doing this because the money came either indirectly from research councils, or from the charities that were supporting our research. But I always felt that the university library ought to be able to provide these kinds of facilities.

RP: *This would clearly have made you receptive to what Velterop had to say about Open Access, which implies that papers are made freely available on the Internet.*

IG: Indeed, since I had had first-hand experience of the pricing issue, Open Access was of inherent interest to me.

RP: *Presumably you then had to persuade the committee of the need for an inquiry. Was that hard?*

IG: Well, when we next sat down to discuss what new inquiries we should set up I mentioned the topic. As chairman it is always easier to get five votes where others only get one, but you do still have to make a case for your topic.

In the event, various people thought it sounded like a good idea, and the Committee agreed to take up the issue.

The concern

RP: *In making your case, you presumably discussed the problem that libraries face, and you would have mentioned Open Access. But what was the overarching concern as you saw it?*

IG: The Committee had started out with a concern about the scientific endeavour in this country, and our general goal was to incentivise people and ensure there was money for them, especially young people. That was one of our major concerns.

We knew, for instance, that getting research published is always a problem for young scientists, not least because of the order in which names are published on papers – the boss always has their name first, even though you know that the PhD students have done all the work!

We also had a concern about how the careers of young people were controlled, because whether something got published depended on the boss. And we knew that young researchers weren't encouraged in the writing of papers, and they weren't told which journals to send them to.

RP: *presumably the concern was not just that young scientists might not get published but, as a result of the serials crisis, that their papers might not be read even if they did get published?*

IG: That is right.

RP: *So was the main concern that young researchers couldn't get published, or that they wouldn't get read?*

IG: Both. But my overarching concern was that they wouldn't get a chance to have their research communicated, which is vital if they are to get into the jobs market.

In addition, we had just done an inquiry into the Research Assessment Exercise ([RAE](#)), so we knew that where you published your work could give your university, or your department, considerable kudos in terms of RAE ratings – now called the REF of course.

In other words, researchers were rated on where they published, and there is a league structure for research journals. As a consequence, whether you publish in *Nature* or in the *Proceedings of the Royal Society* makes a big difference. Everybody wants to get something in *Nature* – because you get maximum marks if you can get published in there.

RP: I am curious because the [questions asked](#) in the press notice advertising the 2004 Inquiry were focused on things like pricing and open access, not on the problems young scientists face in getting published. And presumably your conversation with Jan Velterop would have been focused on Open Access. So I am wondering how and why the inquiry's terms of reference evolved in the way they did.

IG: Well, Jan had convinced me that there was a case for looking at Open Access. At the same time, we were doing inquiries into other things about scientists: PhD studentships, and research assistants who were on contract for the 25th time in their lives etc.

One or two of us were really concerned about this latter issue. We were more interested in making sure that the practice of science in our universities and research establishments motivated young people better; and women particularly. For me it was always about young scientists.

However, the Committee felt that that topic was not sufficient for an enquiry on its own. Moreover, the rest of the Committee weren't as concerned about young scientists as me. They thought Open Access was a good issue to explore on its own. So we were split.

But we didn't say we must do both, or that we must do one and not the other. We wanted to link the issue of young scientists with the issues of pricing and Open Access. We said that Open Access was a feature of young scientists getting their work out into the public domain. So in the end, the decision was to focus the terms of reference more tightly – not least because drawing inquiries too widely rarely yields a good result, and the issue of scientific careers was something that the Committee continued to deal with pretty comprehensively in other inquiries; via its "routine" scrutiny of the work of the research councils for instance.

RP: Did you discuss young scientists much during the inquiry?

IG: I don't think we did. We didn't have any of them in to give evidence and so on. And as the Inquiry developed it became much more about the companies concerned, and the publishing industry.

RP: So as the Inquiry got underway the emphasis shifted even further in the direction of scholarly publishing?

IG: That's right. In the end, we got taken up by the battle with the industry. One thing that made this inquiry distinctive, by the way, was the names of the bodies that expressed concern about our inquiries. It was immediately clear that Elsevier, *Nature*, the Royal Society, the Institute of Physics, and all the groups that published their own journals were really worried about it; and they began working behind the scenes to counter our inquiries.

RP: I'd like to come on to the resistance you faced a little later. But just to clarify: the change of direction was driven by the kind of [responses](#) you got back when you published the press notice?

IG: Absolutely. People came out from under all sorts of stones to try and influence us. The topic obviously touched a nerve with a lot of people. As I say, it touched a nerve with the learned

societies, for instance, who evidently resented anybody even looking at them, because they are so perfect.

In fact, I had experienced this kind of thing before, when we did an [inquiry](#) into the [Royal Society](#) in 2002. At the time, I took some real stick from [Bob May](#).⁵ His attitude was “How dare you”?

But I knew enough about things to know that he was bullshitting me.

Anyway, when we launched the Inquiry the learned societies got really fidgety about its potential impact on the money they were making. The publishing industry came after us too.

RP: And perhaps for that reason what had been envisaged as a two-session interim inquiry turned into a full-blown six-session investigation.

IG: Yes, it grew into an examination of the whole role of the publishing industry and its sustainability in Britain – particularly as new models of publishing developed.

Some of us on the Committee knew what annoyed people at the grass roots. We knew that getting published, and deciding which journals you should publish in, had become a major issue – in terms of assessment for instance. And we knew about the pricing issues.

Moreover, it was soon apparent to us that there was an issue here that had been bubbling away for some time, and we felt that somebody needed to get hold of it. We were determined that the issues that came up should be properly examined.

In particular, it became clear to us that we needed to establish whether the current method for publishing research was still the right way for scientists to disseminate their research – research, after all, that is paid for by taxpayers.

RP: As you imply, a number of the Committee members had worked as scientists.

IG: Yes. I had been a scientist. So too had [Des Turner](#) and [Brian Iddon](#). All three of us had published. I don't know whether [Evan Harris](#) had, but he is very bright and he knew the issues.

I don't think anyone else had had any hands-on experience of science but we all enjoyed getting stuck into issues where there was a debate to be had.

RP: That had become clear to everybody I suspect. You mentioned your inquiry into the Royal Society and the Royal Academy of Engineering; you ran a number of other high profile inquiries during your time on the Committee too. By 2004, I would think the consensus was that under your chairmanship the Science & Technology Committee was more than happy to grasp nettles!

IG: True, we had been examining [many issues](#) – looking at the issue of [cancer](#) for instance, and looking at learned societies. And we did tend to get stuck into the issues. At one point, the *Times Higher* [called us](#) “The committee from Hell”.

The process

RP: Can I ask how a Select Committee inquiry works? Who manages the process for instance?

IG: The Committee staff manage the inquiry process. They do all the hard work. In this case it was managed by [Emily Commander](#). Emily was at that time the Second Clerk of the Committee and it was her thing that she was given to do.

RP: As I understand it, the procedure is to gather evidence and then arrive at conclusions based on that evidence. Is that right?

⁵ Bob May was then President of the Royal Society, as well as Chief Scientific Adviser to the UK government.

IG: Correct. And an important first task, of course, is to establish what questions to ask. The fact is that MPs are pretty useless at this sort of thing, because they have so many other things going on. They just come to the meetings to play their part. So the questions are drawn up by the staff.

RP: *The staff write the questions for MPs?*

IG: Yes. So we always had a pre-meeting discussion before we took oral evidence. During that discussion we settled on who was going to ask what questions.

It wasn't necessary to ask every question we were given. Sometimes, for instance, you picked up vibes during the hearing and had to go off the track. But all the Committee members want their egos massaged, so traditionally the chairman would start off, and it would then follow on down the line with each member asking their question in turn.

But the staff were very important in making sure that we had all the questions in front of us.

RP: *How would you characterise the tenor and the tone of the discussions as the process unfolded?*

IG: Some of the witnesses were very good. For instance, the founder of BioMed Central ([BMC](#)) [Vitek Tracz](#) was good, although a little talkative. We had to ask him to be briefer at one meeting I remember.

However, it was [Harold Varmus](#) who was the star.

RP: *Harold Varmus is the former director of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), and co-founder of the OA publisher Public Library of Science (PLOS).*

IG: Yes, he came over from the States.

RP: *Why was Varmus asked to give evidence?*

IG: At that time the discussion about Open Access was moving along in the States. One day, some scientists at the [John Innes Centre](#) in Norwich phoned me up to say that they had a scientist over that we might like to hear from. So we asked Varmus to come along to speak to the Committee.

RP: *Ok, so the process was that the terms of reference were set and published, responses were received, witnesses called, questions prepared, and oral evidence heard. I assume that most witnesses you invited were happy to come and give oral evidence, but I believe some were less willing. I am told that Elsevier was reluctant to take part, for instance, and at first would only talk to the Committee via a lobbyist. Is that correct?*

IG: Yes. And we contemplated hauling them in front of the House of Commons.

RP: *Can you explain what you mean?*

IG: Well if a witness refuses to give evidence to a select committee you can stand up at the White Line of the House of Commons and announce publicly that the Committee wants to call them but that they are refusing to come.

RP: *When you say White Line, you are referring to [the Bar](#) in the House of Commons?*

IG: I am. And I was quite prepared to stand up and say that Elsevier were refusing to come. I would have added that they were holding up a very serious and important inquiry.

RP: *Was it under that threat that Elsevier eventually agreed to talk to you?*

IG: Yes, they eventually agreed to talk to us. So we went to visit them in a building they have in London and we talked to the CEO.

RP: That would have been [Crispin Davis](#). And subsequently, I think both Crispin Davis and [Arie Jongejan](#), then CEO Science & Technology at Elsevier, [gave oral evidence](#) to the Committee. How would you characterise the response you got from Elsevier once they agreed to talk?

IG: We got the same response as we got from the Royal Society in 2002: “How dare you challenge us? We are doing so much for Britain”, and so on.

But we countered that by saying “Publishers are determining how creative people are able to do their work, and how that work is made available to the public”.

RP: You saw it as a public interest issue then.

IG: It was also pointed out that there are now other models of publishing, including Open Access.

The main company that came at the inquiry, by the way, was Blackwell’s of Oxford. There was one person in particular I remember – [Bob Campbell](#). He was obviously on the case, because he turned up at all the hearings.

RP: [Blackwell Publishing](#) was [acquired](#) by [John Wiley & Sons](#) in 2006. During the Inquiry, however, it was an independent company, and Campbell was the President.

IG: Indeed. In addition, journals like *Nature* got involved: I can still see [Richard Charkin](#) ⁶ sitting in the committee room. I knew he was very anti what we were doing.

The shaping

RP: How was the outcome of the Inquiry shaped?

IG: As I indicated, Emily Commander was very important to the process. She kept all the stuff together, and she did the hard work.

I also think her work with me was very important, because we talked together about it often. We talked about where it was going, and what should go in the final report.

The rest of the Committee did not want to know everything that was going on at every minute, any more than committee members do with any inquiry.

RP: It was Emily who wrote the report was it?

IG: It was.

RP: I believe a publishing consultant called [David Worlock](#) was also appointed “Specialist Adviser” to the Committee. Why was he chosen?

IG: I don’t know how David Worlock was chosen. The chairman is supposed to ok people but I cannot remember how Worlock got the position of Specialist Adviser. In some of the other sessions we had I had been asked to choose between two or three people, but I cannot remember ever meeting Worlock privately, and I don’t know how his name emerged.

RP: A [memo](#) on the Web indicates that you agreed to appoint Worlock Specialist Adviser to the Committee on 9th February 2004.⁷ So the process is that the staff propose the names of several potential advisers and the Committee selects the person they want. And presumably, the staff assess the suitability of these advisers before proposing their names to MPs?

⁶ Charkin was then [CEO of Macmillan Group](#). He is now at [Bloomsbury Publishing](#).

⁷ Worlock published his own [press release](#) the next day.

IG: Yes, but then how would the clerks know who David Worlock was if they were not in the field either? Obviously, Committee staff were being lobbied and touted. I know they were, and they had a lot of enquiries from people. So you wonder how they selected Worlock.

RP: Would I be right to think that, as the inquiry progressed, two major groupings emerged, with traditional publishers on one side, and advocates for Open Access on the other?

IG: Oh yes, and it was quite clear that they didn't like each other.

RP: And presumably within the Open Access group opinions also divided. Open Access publishers like PLoS and BMC, for instance, probably did not agree with researchers like [Stevan Harnad](#) about what was required. In the main, OA publishers would have been supporters of [gold OA](#), whereas Harnad and other advocates of "self-archiving" would have been pushing heavily for [green OA](#)?

IG: True. Steve wrote to me once or twice by the way. He communicated to me that while he was glad we were holding the Inquiry, he did not agree with some of the conclusions that appeared to be emerging.

RP: How did you respond?

IG: I said, "How do you know what conclusions we are going to reach? Even I don't know what they are yet!"

RP: There was of course a widely held suspicion that subscription publishers were actively lobbying the Committee, presumably with a view to having the Committee support the status quo?

IG: There certainly was a lot of suspicion about the publishers, and not without good reason. At one point the Chief Clerk came to me and said that he had evidence there had been leakage of information to Elsevier.

RP: What did you do about it?

IG: I asked him if he thought that we should raise the issue, and we wrote to the [Liaison Committee](#) about it.

RP: What is the Liaison Committee?

IG: The Committee where all the select committee chairs meet.

RP: So it was suspected that information from private meetings of the Committee had been leaked to a publisher?

IG: Correct.

RP: But it was a suspicion, not a certainty?

IG: Well, we didn't progress it. We just decided to make sure that we didn't say anything that could be leaked again. In fact, we didn't hold any more private meetings.

The problem at that time was that a view on how you deal with these kinds of issues was only just beginning to emerge. If the same thing happened today – in the light of the [Leveson Inquiry](#) – there might have been an inquiry into the matter. But there was certainly a suspicion that information was getting to the industry.

The Report

RP: *Your Report* was eventually published on July 20th 2004, under the title, “Scientific Publications: Free for all?” In the Report you **recommended** that, “all UK higher education institutions establish institutional repositories on which their published output can be stored and from which it can be read, free of charge, online ... [and that] ... Research Councils and other Government funders mandate their funded researchers to deposit a copy of all of their articles in this way.”

The Report added, “Institutional repositories will help to improve access to journals but a more radical solution may be required in the long term. Early indications suggest that the author-pays publishing model could be viable. We remain unconvinced by many of the arguments mounted against it. Nonetheless, this Report concludes that further experimentation is necessary, particularly to establish the impact that a change of publishing models would have on learned societies and in respect of the ‘free rider’ problem.”

In short, the Committee recommended that the UK embrace green OA, or self-archiving, not gold OA (or OA publishing) – although it suggested that the latter be experimented with.

IG: Correct.

RP: *How were the recommendations in the Report arrived at?*

IG: The way it works with inquiries is that the staff member in charge discusses the issues initially with the Chairman of the Committee, and then with the whole Committee. So after we had interviewed all the witnesses, Emily went away and wrote a draft, and showed it to me. I then made any changes I felt were necessary before it went to the full Committee for approval in draft. The Committee then argued about what the general emphasis should be.

In this case, there wasn’t an awful lot of changing because the idea of institutional repositories was the big idea at the time. And it was hardly a radical idea. Moreover, it came from the experience of universities themselves. The important point was that we felt the whole system for publishing research needed to change.

RP: *So the Committee’s vision was that all UK universities should set up an institutional repository and researchers should be mandated to self-archive their papers in that repository. In this way, anyone who did not have access to a particular paper via a journal subscription could obtain a copy free of charge from the author’s repository. However, you felt that something further might be needed too – some form of Open Access publishing perhaps?*

IG: That’s right.

RP: *I mentioned that the feeling on the street at the time was that the Committee had been successfully lobbied by publishers. There was therefore no expectation that the Committee would recommend wide scale use of institutional repositories, which publishers have always viewed as anathema. And yet you made that surprise recommendation.*

IG: We did. And when a few months later I used the phrase “institutional repository” at the British Library – when I **spoke to SCONUL**⁸ I was cheered to the echo. I was a hero just for one day!

But we always knew that the repository model would not be the only one to emerge. We just thought that we should say something that would capture the imagination of people, and get them reacting.

RP: *Nevertheless, the UK government **rejected** most of your recommendations. Indeed, it did not even accept that there was an access problem. It also said, “the Government does not*

⁸ The Society of College, National and University Libraries.

think it should intervene to support one model or another. The Government is also not convinced that the ‘author-pays’ model is inherently superior to the current model.”

And with regard to institutional repositories it said, “The Government recognises the potential benefits of institutional repositories and sees them as a significant development worthy of encouragement. But it believes that each Institution has to make its own decision about institutional repositories depending on individual circumstances.” Why do you think the government responded in the way it did?

IG: My belief is that they were lobbied strongly, probably by Sainsbury. I have no evidence of that, but I would imagine he did.

RP: Lord Sainsbury was at that time the UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science and Innovation. No doubt he in turn would have been lobbied by publishers.

IG: For sure. And as I said, the learned societies were very active behind the scenes too, worried that their profits were under attack.

Doubtless publishers talked to the Department of Trade and Industry⁹, and for that reason, I assume, the DTI countered the evidence provided by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC).

*RP: Right, and you **responded** by publishing **a second report** criticising the Government’s response. Amongst other things, you **said** that the government had failed to address directly the issues the Committee had raised, and it had sought to “neutralise” critical voices – in particular the views of JISC. Specifically, the DTI had offered to coordinate the responses from other departments and Government-funded organisations and then watered them down. As you **put it** at the time, “DTI is apparently more interested in kowtowing to the powerful publishing lobby than it is in looking after the best interests of British science. This isn’t evidence-based policy, it’s policy-based evidence. The DTI are clearly wearing the Government’s trousers on this issue and that’s wrong. Not only has it ignored the advice of the body appointed to advise on this issue, it has actually tried to stop them giving us this advice directly, just because they support the Committee’s conclusions rather than the DTI view.”*

IG: Absolutely right.

RP: Presumably, you knew that JISC’s views had been neutralised because you had access to both documents and you could see that they did not match.

IG: Yes, and as I recall we also talked quietly to civil servants about what was really going on. Once again, we contemplated taking the issue to the House.

*RP: We should perhaps note that your Report assumed **more money** would be provided to carry out its recommendations. In calling for all UK universities to create their own institutional repositories, for instance, you would have known that doing so would incur costs. And you directly called for funds to be provided to allow researchers to pay to publish in OA journals. You also recommended that the British Library create a central online repository for those UK researchers without access to an institutional repository. Requests for money are invariably rebuffed by governments nowadays are they not?*

IG: That’s true, but we made the recommendations in the context of universities needing more money. Money, that is, for things other than for paying staff more.

And we knew that the government was thinking of increasing **student tuition fees**. We thought that if new money was coming in from student fees then some of that money could be used to create and support institutional repositories.

⁹ Now called the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, or **BIS**.

I should add, however, that I personally opposed student fees, as did some others, and it was a big fight. Yet although the Government eventually got its way, the extra money raised by student fees went into buildings, salaries and other market factors. In other words, even though scholarly communication is an essential part of academic life, none of this extra money was used to support Open Access.

RP: So what do we make of the fact that, despite the Government's negative response to your recommendations, the following year Research Councils UK ([RCUK](#)) [adopted a self-archiving mandate](#) along the lines you had suggested?

IG: Well, we had been talking to them independently about other things, and we raised this issue with them at the same time. They were sympathetic to the idea because they were scientists as well. And they thought that what we were saying made sense – i.e. that information should be available for everybody to read, not just in this country but across the world too.

By the way, at the same time that we were conducting the inquiry into scientific publishing we were looking at [science and international development](#) issues too. As part of that process I went to Malawi, and I spoke to scientists at the [University of Malawi](#). They all told me that they got very little scientific information – because they couldn't afford to buy the journals.

RP: In your mind, therefore, this was an international development issue as well?

IG: Absolutely it was an international development issue; and we said that in our report on international development. We pointed out that many academic scientists don't know what is going on in other countries because they can't access the journals.

The lobbying

RP: We have mentioned lobbying a few times. Can we explore this issue a little? Were you personally lobbied by anyone in connection with the inquiry on scientific publishing?

IG: Apart from the original approach from Jan Velterop there was no direct lobbying at me. Elsevier never invited me to a dirty weekend anywhere for instance!

RP: The objective of lobbying, clearly, is to try and persuade the person or organisation being lobbied to favour the organisation responsible for that lobbying. How does lobbying generally take place in the context of a select committee inquiry? Presumably committee members are invited to receptions and so on?

IG: It could be that, or it could be an invitation to lunch. Or someone might come and talk to you over coffee in [Portcullis House](#) or somewhere like that.

Sometimes it goes further. They may take you away for a weekend, for instance, to a country retreat, to a conference say. So they might hold a conference on publishing and invite a committee chairman along.

Personally I don't remember ever being invited to do that, but during some inquiries I was involved in I was occasionally invited to speak at a meeting on behalf of the Select Committee. When that happens, you have to check with the committee whether it is on or not.

My view is that it is always better not to get involved. Anybody who has any politics in their soul knows that you don't do that. You just keep away from it, because there is no any such thing as a free lunch.

RP: Did you meet with a lot of what one might call the stakeholders of scientific publishing outside the committee room?

IG: There were a lot of sessions and meetings that came out of it. For instance, I met lots of groups of university people from the States who were very keen on Open Access.

I also went to a meeting in the City with some investment people who were worried that our report would put the publishing industry in the pits. We had lunch with them in the City.

RP: *These were people who had invested in scholarly publishers presumably.*

IG: That was my understanding. They were worried that we were going to screw up the whole industry and, as a result, they were going to lose money from their investments.

By the way, I think Elsevier played a very strong lobbying role behind the scenes, both within the City and behind our backs within government. They were trying to prevent any attack on the very large profits they make from publishing.

On the other hand, the Director of the [Wellcome Trust](#), [Mark Walport](#),¹⁰ was very positive about what we were doing. He even had a reception for us at Wellcome.

RP: *There was [a debate](#) in [Westminster Hall](#) about your Report as well wasn't there?*

IG: There was, and I remember [Ed Vaizey](#) was there. He is now the Minister for [Culture, Communications and Creative Industries](#), and he is an Oxford MP.

He was there to poo poo anything the report said. Maybe you read [what he said](#) in the debate. He was very pro the publishing industry and said something about people in Oxford depending on them for jobs and all that stuff. I don't know if Ed still believes all that or not.

RP: *I guess you are saying that Vaizey's association with Oxford coloured his views. One could argue, however, that MPs are supposed to represent their constituents. I wonder if your views on OA might have been different if Blackwell Publishing had been based in Norwich.*

IG: I don't think they would have been; I hope they wouldn't. I didn't have a reputation for going along with companies in Norwich. No, I think the principle is much, much more important, and it is an international principle, it is not just about one company.

RP: *I think it fair to conclude that the lobbying continued even after the publication of your Report. In 2005, for instance, OA advocate [David Prosser](#)¹¹ made a Freedom of Information request for details of Lord Sainsbury's meetings with the various stakeholders of scholarly publishing.¹² As the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science and Innovation, of course, Sainsbury was instrumental in setting UK science policy, including OA policy. OA advocates made much of the fact that Sainsbury met with or spoke to Elsevier's Crispin Davis more often than with other stakeholders, both at the time the Inquiry was under way, and afterwards. Should we make anything of this, or is this just business as usual?*

IG: It's the way life is. I am sure the publishers went straight to Sainsbury to see what was going on when we announced the Inquiry. After all, he was the minister.

I do remember talking to Sainsbury about Varmus when I organised a debate on doubling the science budget. I mentioned that we were doing the Inquiry, but I could tell that Sainsbury was dubious.

RP: *You didn't feel that he was sympathetic to Open Access?*

IG: I think the Inquiry hit a lot of spots with people like him, because of the British industry argument. I had always assumed that publishers would get to him, and use him, but that he couldn't say anything to us.

¹⁰ Walport is now also the UK government's [Chief Scientific Adviser](#).

¹¹ Prosser is currently Executive Director of Research Libraries UK.

¹² Details are available [here](#).

Certainly Sainsbury never really talked to us privately about the Inquiry, even though he and I were in the same political party. You would have thought he might have taken us aside and said, “Look you guys. Tony [Blair] says ...” Because that is how it happened in other situations.

That he didn’t do that might have been partly because I was distrusted. They would have suspected that I wouldn’t go along with it.

RP: You were viewed within the Labour Party as somewhat of an outsider weren’t you? Your own man, as it were.

IG: Yes, and in 2005 they eventually got rid of me from the Committee. [Hilary Armstrong](#)¹³ organised it, on the basis that I [wasn’t preaching the New Labour Line on Radio 4](#).¹⁴

RP: Were you at all sympathetic to the view that if you disrupted the status quo in the scholarly publishing market you might damage an important British industry?

IG: No I wasn’t sympathetic to it all. The way I saw it was that the fact that these people came forward in the way they did demonstrated that they were very sensitive about what was going on. These publishers had never been challenged, and they believed that nobody had the right to challenge them.

The aftermath

RP: You clearly rattled publishers and learned societies though!

IG: We did. Incidentally, I had a conversation with Campbell after the Report was published. He was still interested in what was going to happen of course. In particular, I remember he and I had a drink together in the [Groucho Club](#). Campbell said to me, “What can we do about it?”

I said, “I think we really need to look at doing the Inquiry again with all that we have found out since – the aftermath of it.”

RP: Have you followed the Open Access debate as it has unfolded since your 2004 Inquiry?

IG: I have indeed.

RP: I wonder what you make of recent developments, particularly the [Finch Report](#) and RCUK’s [new OA policy](#). The latter was announced in June to replace the 2006 policy introduced as a result of your Report. Essentially, where your Report prioritised green OA and self-archiving, Finch and RCUK both recommended that gold OA should become the main vehicle for publishing research, using the pay-to-publish model.

IG: We talked about the other models that might be possible at the time of our Inquiry of course. We went for only one in order to get things moving – because we thought there was some leverage there.

RP: What is your view of the pay-to-publish model for communicating research?

IG: The idea of people paying to have their papers published is fine from the academic’s point of view, so long as they don’t have to pay out of their own pockets and can use money from their research funds.

If they are told that they will have to pay out of their own pockets, or from their university funds, on the other hand, then they are likely to get really upset.

¹³ At that time [Chief Whip](#) in the House of Commons.

¹⁴ See also [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

RP: Well RCUK has said it will pay the costs by means of block grants. However, it appears that this money will come from [the existing national research budget](#); it will not be new money.

IG: Universities are always pleading poverty, of course, but in a sense there is new money. There is the income from foreign students for instance.

Here in Norwich there are thousands of Chinese students – all of whom pay [somewhere between £12,000 and £15,000 a year](#). That is perfectly fine, but where is all that money going? When I look around the universities I visit as part of the charitable work I do, or when visiting with think tanks, I see a lot of new buildings going up.

RP: So do you welcome the Finch recommendations, and the new RCUK policy?

IG: Yes I do. The debate will continue; it will get out into organisations, who will try different things. And in two years we will see what has happened.

RP: You mentioned academics getting upset. We should note that the [Russell Group of universities](#) greeted the Finch Report with considerable consternation. And faced with a potential revolt from these research-intensive universities, the UK Minister of State for Universities and Science [David Willetts](#) has promised to provide £10m towards their OA publishing costs. Again, however, this is not new money; it will come from the existing research budget. Meanwhile, advocates of self-archiving (green OA) like Stevan Harnad are furious. As a consequence of Finch and the new RCUK policy, they point out, institutional repositories look set to be relegated to playing a minor role only, as storage and preservation tools. What is striking about this decision, of course, is that Finch justified it by saying that self-archiving hasn't worked.

IG: I have never seen a good assessment of whether repositories have worked or not. Is there good evidence that they did?

RP: There is data available. Steven Harnad cited it [in a recent paper he gave in Oxford](#) for instance. This indicates that around 25% of papers are available on an OA basis worldwide today (35% in the UK).¹⁵ However, says Harnad, much of this is available because of green OA, not gold – specifically 21.4% is green and 2.4% is gold. Moreover, the reason why green is higher in the UK appears to be because, following your Report, RCUK introduced its 2005 mandate.

IG: I have not seen that data, but I would imagine Harnad would say that.

RP: Let me send the data over for you to review.

IG: Ok. Thanks.

RP: I'll get back to you.

PART TWO

(Conducted on 8th October 2012)

RP: Thanks for agreeing to speak to me again. Can I start by asking if you have any sense of whether the members of the Finch committee were the same stakeholders as those who gave evidence to the 2004 Inquiry, or whether they represented a different set of interests?

¹⁵ For a different perspective picture see [here](#), and read the debate [here](#).

IG: They were exactly the same as far as I could see.

RP: Because one of the criticisms of the Finch Committee is that it was top heavy with publishers.

IG: Well we had that same pressure too. In the end, however, we weren't too concerned whether Elsevier came and gave evidence to us – although, as I said, they did eventually get around to talking to us.

The fact is that it didn't make much difference because we just disagreed with them. When we asked them how they saw the whole issue there was nothing in what they said that we agreed with. Really nothing.

RP: I imagine one of the arguments publishers would have made to you was that, thanks to the so-called Big Deal – in which libraries buy subscriptions to large portfolios of electronic journals at a discounted price – researchers can get free-at-the-point-of-use access to everything they need. As such, there is no access problem.

IG: Yes, that is what they did say.

RP: You were not persuaded?

IG: Not at all. Somebody has paid something for the information. And this is information, remember, garnished from the work of people who are paid by the taxpayer, and using facilities paid for out of the public purse.

Given this, we said, the information should be out in the open, not locked behind a paywall.

The doubts

RP: Did you get a chance to look at the data I sent over?

IG: Yes, it is very interesting. I hadn't seen it before.

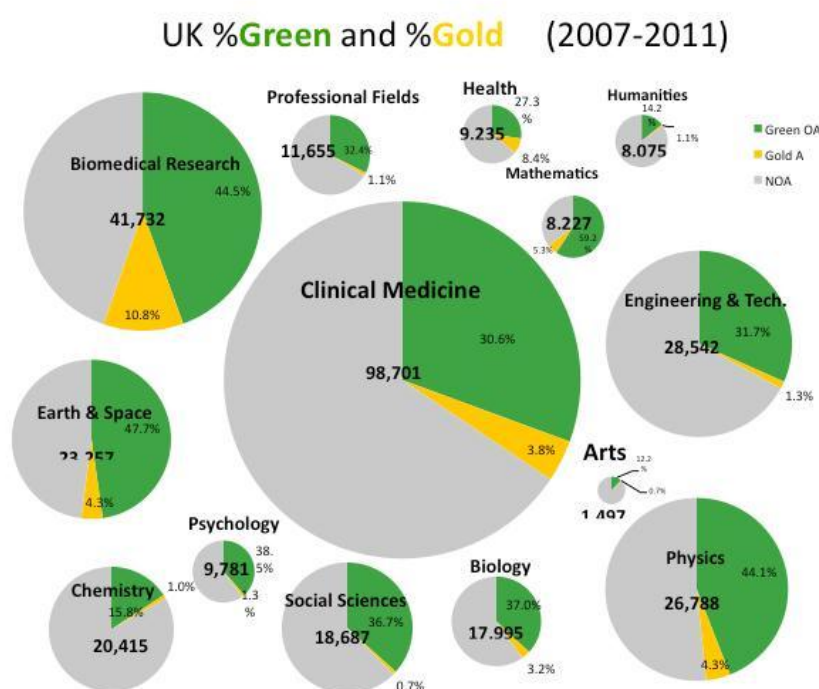


Image courtesy of Yassine Gargouri

RP: As I said last time, we spoke, it would seem to suggest that, to date, green OA has been more successful than gold OA; and it looks as though it has the potential to continue growing more quickly than gold. If that is right, do you think that the Finch Committee and RCUK might have been better following the example you set in 2004 and prioritising green over gold?

IG: I think that is right. To be quite honest, we were just fishing in the water at the time. We didn't know how it was going to pan out as it was early days.

But when I look at how it has developed it would appear that we were right. I know that the librarians were right behind the idea of repositories, and that seems to be reflected in what Steve has found out.

RP: Harnad's research group has just produced some new figures, this time on mandates. Specifically, they explored the relationship between the strength of a self-archiving mandate and the percentage of papers made open access in repositories as a result. As Harnad [puts it](#), they found that "deposit number and rate is significantly correlated with mandate strength: The stronger the mandate, the more the deposits. The strongest mandates generate deposit rates of 70%+ within 2 years of adoption, compared to the un-mandated deposit rate of 20%. The effect is already detectable at the national level, where the UK, which has the largest proportion of Green OA mandates, has a national OA rate of 35%, compared to the global baseline of 25%." In short, if researchers are mandated, and those mandates are effectively enforced, green OA is far more effective than gold. Harnad's conclusion is that RCUK would therefore be far better to strengthen its existing self-archiving mandate than push a pay-to-publish model on the research community.

IG: What have the university librarians done about this? Have they not looked at it?

RP: Librarians have been active for sure. But in the end, it is only funders and university administrators who can ensure compliance – because they are the ones who hold the purse strings, and it is they who reward researchers through promotion and tenure. For instance, the Rector at the [University of Liège](#) in Belgium [Bernard Rentier](#) has been very successful in filling his university's repository by tying self-archiving to promotion. The university's [OA policy](#) states that no papers can be considered for P&T purposes unless they are freely available in the University's institutional repository [ORBi](#).

IG: That's how it should be. That is how Harold Varmus and others would think of it too I am sure. And Mark Walport has been making noises about it as well

RP: Certainly we could note that, as a result of introducing an effective compliance verification system, the National Institutes of Health in the US is [now achieving 75% compliance](#). By contrast, the Wellcome Trust has only secured a 55% compliance rate – which is why it recently [announced plans to strengthen its OA policy](#). On the other hand, the RCUK appears to have done little or nothing to ensure compliance, as RCUK's [Mark Thorley seemed to concede](#) to Nature in March.

IG: In the end, this depends on leadership. In my view, Mark Walport should take this up as his very first issue now that his is the UK's Chief Scientist.

RP: When we spoke the other day, you expressed satisfaction with the Finch/RCUK recommendations. Is that still your position?

IG: Having seen these figures I think it is up in the air again in my head. Maybe we were right all along.

RP: There is another aspect to this; and it is one that worries many OA advocates. As a result of the RCUK policy, they argue, subscription publishers will not need to convert their journals

to OA, but can simply offer so-called “[hybrid OA](#)”. In other words, researchers will be able to continue publishing in subscription journals, so long as they pay an article-processing charge (APC) to make their paper OA. Hybrid OA is [generally more expensive](#), costing between [\\$3,000 and \\$5,000](#) per paper. Moreover, publishers of hybrid journals will continue to earn subscriptions as well as making money from APCs. As such, in some cases the UK research community will end up paying publishers twice – due to “double dipping”. In short, RCUK appears set to create a situation whereby traditional publishers will be able to earn even greater profits from the research community than they have in the past. True, RCUK has [stressed](#) that it is not opposed to green OA, but it has refused to alter the wording of its policy, which clearly requires researchers to prioritise gold. Harnad [believes](#) that publishers will respond by lengthening their self-archiving embargoes (making them non-compliant with the RCUK policy), and pushing researchers towards hybrid OA.

IG: Well if that is what Steve thinks, it will happen. It looks as though publishers are going to make a mint out of this!

Getting in the way

RP: To go back to your 2004 Report for a moment: Would it be accurate to say that while you recognised publishers’ concerns about the impact of OA on their businesses, you concluded that it was more important to prioritise the needs of the research endeavour over the needs of publishers?

IG: That’s right, exactly.

RP: Was that the Committee’s overwhelming view?

IG: Absolutely, that was the paramount view. There is no doubt about that.

RP: And from what you say, I conclude that you felt publishers were getting in the way of making important and necessary changes to the way that research is communicated?

IG: Yes, I did. Look, it was clear to us that publishers were at the centre of a system that was allowing them to make a lot of money for managing a process about which questions had begun to be asked. And we asked those questions.

We asked, for instance, why people are not paid for doing peer review. I knew about this because I used to review papers all the time when I was an academic. But I never got paid for doing so. It was just part of your job, although it was never written down in your job description. We would review research applications as well. That is just what we did.

RP: So you felt that publishers were making more money from the publishing process than was justified?

IG: Yes, and we questioned them about this. We said: “Academics are doing a serious job reviewing papers for your journals. You are making a lot of money out of it, and yet these poor devils get nothing. How do you justify it?”

They replied, “Oh for some journals we do pay”.

But this was true only for a few medical journals, where somebody had been made assistant editor of the editorial committee or something similar. They got a bit of money for doing it, but it was very selective; and I am sure that those people got to influence which papers got published.

RP: Did you feel that the learned societies were doing equally well out of the system, and were equally resistant to change? Did you perhaps feel that there was little difference between learned societies and publishers?

IG: I would say that the only difference is in terms of the money they were making. Remember the Royal Society has its *Proceedings*. So it is also a publisher. And they can charge what they like to libraries for their journals.

So the philosophy appeared to be exactly the same, and the response was the same — “Don’t you dare threaten our business. It is nice little earner, and we would go under if we didn’t publish this way.”

RP: Is it not therefore striking that the upshot of Finch/RCUK looks likely to be that OA will allow publishers to make even more money from taxpayers than before? True, the world will have Open Access (to UK-generated research at least), but publishers’ profits look as though they could rise even higher. Obviously not everyone agrees that this will be the outcome, but it does seem to be a possibility.

IG: Well the Kindle versus the traditional book was a big issue too, but the Kindles are beginning to win out.

On the other hand, of course, even though scientists now happily use computers to access DNA information and so on, when it comes to publishing their own information they really are their own worst enemy. They are worried about giving more money to the publishers, but they are drawn to the kudos of being published in a high-profile journal.

Nature is still the big thing for them, and promotion and money all depend on the prestige of the journal they publish in.

RP: As you say, researchers are incentivised to publish in journals with a high *impact factor*. Doing so brings benefits in terms of promotion and tenure, and it helps them with the REF, which determines how much funding their department gets.

IG: So that is also what is wrong. We have to examine that at the same time.

Real agents for change

RP: Essentially, I guess we are saying that the power of journal brands (the “league structure” you referred to last time we spoke) locks researchers into a system controlled not by the research community but by publishers, many of whom are for-profit organisations. And the present danger seems to be that Finch/RCUK could set that system in aspic, thereby allowing publishers to continue to call the shots even in an OA world.

IG: Of course, but RCUK depends on the government, and so it is not an independent organisation. When it publishes a new policy, for instance, it will be interacting with government departments. One might therefore wonder how independent they are in their assessment of the situation.

By contrast, universities are to some extent independent, certainly in terms of how they spend their money; and they fight for that independence. It is they who determine what salaries professors get, for instance, and it is they who decide how much their vice chancellor is paid.

RP: So universities could say to their researchers, “Actually, we are not going to encourage you to publish in high impact journals like *Nature* anymore. We want you to publish here, and we want you to publish in this way.”

IG: Correct.

RP: If that’s right, then the real agents for change are not governments, but universities presumably. Today they incentivise researchers to publish in high impact journals. Tomorrow they could incentivise them to publish in a very different way.

IG: Absolutely, the current incentives play into publishers' hands. That is the major factor. If you break that, you break the publishers hold on the research community, and their ability to mess things about, and to dictate.

Moreover, in terms of publishing, it is not just academics who want to read research papers today. As we saw with the [climate change controversy](#) here in Norwich, somebody hacks into some emails and leaks them. Suddenly the public is saying that these scientists are conning us, and a whole policy change takes place.

Right now, therefore, there is a huge lobbying effort for the public to know what is going on. But the point is that it is not necessary to publish in hugely expensive glossy journals in order to share research results with the public.

RP: Another possibility, therefore, is that researchers themselves could launch a publishing revolution. Indeed some academics are now [beginning to say](#), "Wait a minute. We have the Web today. Why don't we just put our ideas and our research up on the Internet, organise for it to be peer reviewed ourselves, and forget about publishing in a traditional journal".¹⁶

IG: Exactly right, that is what I would do. Have you heard of [Michael Nielsen](#)?

RP: The physicist who wrote [Reinventing Discovery](#), the book about open science?

IG: Yes, it's all about blogging and so on. In other words, with Open Access you don't need to write a scientific paper in order to share your ideas and your research. You can blog your thoughts and experiments. This allows people to get access to each other's minds and ideas. Nielsen has taken the argument one stage further, which is good.

Set the hare running

RP: No doubt you followed [the drama](#) over the Research Works Act ([RWA](#)) earlier this year. The RWA was a piece of US legislation supported by Elsevier that would have effectively reversed the NIH's [Public Access Policy](#) requiring taxpayer-funded research to be made freely accessible online, and prevented any other federal agency from introducing a similar requirement.

IG: Yes, that was very interesting because they backed off in the end.

RP: Elsevier appears to have withdrawn its support for the RWA when it realised that it was no longer just librarians screaming at it, but researchers as well. Researchers, after all, can simply refuse to publish in its journals. Indeed, [nearly 13,000 researchers](#) have now committed to boycott Elsevier in protest at its pricing policies.

IG: And that was what did not happen in 2004: When we held our Inquiry researchers didn't get together on the issue, and their organisation was poor. We didn't talk to the trade unions, for instance, because at that time they were active on various other things. As a consequence, there was no organisation of academics we could speak to that had taken up the issue.

That was a big gap. In the other inquiries we did we could usually get that kind of input. If it was an inquiry about cancer for instance, we would invite the public in to tell us why they had set up a little group in Bradford when there was a national health service.

RP: You are saying that during your Inquiry no group representing the interests of academics responded to your press notice, or offered to give evidence to the Committee, and you could find no suitable group to invite in to give evidence?

IG: There was none of that at all. We had Varmus come over from the States, but he was running a big campaign over there anyway.

¹⁶ See also [here](#).

RP: So what do you think has been learned since 2004 so far as scientific publishing is concerned?

IG: When I had that drink with Bob Campbell in the Groucho Club I mentioned last week, I said that what was needed was to make sure that we got academics in to discuss the issue; not just those who run the learned societies, and the CEOs, but the academics themselves.

We really need to get them to talk about the nature of their job, and the “publish or perish” ethos that determines the way in which they do their work.

RP: And you would like to see an organised group of researchers take on the issue?

IG: I would. We need to think about the young people who are doing PhDs and postdocs today, those just starting out and looking for jobs. The fact is that the publishing model that we have will determine whether or not they get a job.

Personally, I don’t care how it is done, so long as the results are out there and people can look at them. The point is that today it does not have to be in a glossy magazine that costs the university library something like £25,000 a year to subscribe to.

RP: If you were running your Inquiry again today what else that you would do differently?

IG: I think there are other ways of doing it now: for instance, by bringing the parliamentary committee out to meet people, and talk to them at their workplace. If you did, most of them would probably say. “Oh we have never thought about it, because there has never been an alternative.”

So it is partly an educational process. And if you had a Select Committee come to meet you, it would mean that you would have to think about it, and discuss the issues. During my entire career, I never heard academics discuss these matters.

RP: So rather than sitting in Portcullis House, and calling people in to give evidence, you would go out to meet them?

IG: Absolutely that’s what happens most of the time now. There is an attempt to go out to one or two meetings.

When we did the [RAE exercise](#), for instance, I did a whole inquiry here at the [University of East Anglia](#), and other people did it elsewhere in the country. People wouldn’t come to London, but if you go to them you can get them to talk.

And by God did they talk about the RAE. That is what we need with this now, to open it up, to take the discussion out to the community. There has been some experience of using repositories, so we should get them to talk about it. And librarians will have views on this too. They could tell us what is happening in their profession.

RP: In retrospect, how important would you say the 2004 Report was for the growth of Open Access?

IG: I think it set the hare running. To be honest we didn’t have a perfect solution, because we wanted to carry academics with us.

We felt a new avenue had opened up in university life that needed to be explored seriously, and we needed academics to take it up. As I said, in all my academic life I never heard any academics really talk about this issue.

So I was always grateful to Jan Velterop for approaching me. I could immediately see that it was a topic that needed examining.

RP: Finally, do you feel that the concerns that led you to set up your 2004 Inquiry look likely to be resolved in the near future?

IG: I think the models we looked at are still there. But the industry is still making whacking amounts of money by selling glossy journals that are probably read by very few people, certainly not by the public. The whole GMO debate shows you that people don't read papers; they just read an online summary, or what the [Mail on Sunday](#) tells them.

Let's be clear, publishers are going to fight back and make it difficult. But I cannot believe that they are not smart enough to know that they could lose this sector of their industry. After all, things change; and technology changes. They must see that. Technology just happens, and that is what is happening in academic life. So publishers will surely want to find other ways of doing things themselves.

RP: Ok, thank you very much for speaking to me.



Richard Poynder 2012

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